



I Dare You, Back

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For everyone who wanted Derek's story.

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Chapter 1

Derek stormed into the apartment and slammed the door behind him. Everyone pissed him off, just by existing most of the time. Steven looked up from the couch, eyes wide, sandwich held to his open mouth, frozen. "What the fuck is your problem?" Derek snarled as he flung himself into the chair and dropped his bag onto the floor at his feet.

Steven lowered the sandwich and raised his eyebrows. "I'd say that's my line."

"The world is full of assholes."

"True. Any particular asshole pissing you off," he cleared his throat, "today?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

"Some days lately, I wish I were. You'd be easier to deal with if I was in an alcoholic haze twenty four seven."

"You're nuts." Derek leaned back, scowling at Steven.

Steven's sigh was massive. "Look, I was hoping you'd get over this ... thing, whatever it is, but you've been a royal bitch since before Christmas." Steven leaned forward. "If you want to talk about it, I'm here. We're best buds right?."

"I'm fine."

"Derek." Steven gave him a stern look. "You snap anyone's head off if they even breathe near you, you totally flipped when I didn't go to some random party with you New Year's Eve, the bathroom is a pig sty, and you haven't had a date in forever."

Derek continued to glower in silence.

"Is that it? Do you want me to set you up with someone? There are a couple of guys in my classes, and Cory knows another guy on the swim team. We'll get you laid." Steven gave Derek a hopeful look.

"Not everything can be cured by fucking you know." Derek pushed to his feet and peered down his nose at Steven. "I'm not some slut you can pimp out to your desperate friends."

"I, I didn't mean that." Steven was floundering; he'd just been trying to help.

"Yeah right. You think I'm useless for anything but an easy lay. Join the club. I get it. I know my reputation. Well fuck you." That was the last thing he needed, Steven getting all up in his face and trying to set him up with God knows who. Derek could find a piece of ass if he wanted one. It wasn't like he'd had any trouble for the last two years. Lots of guys wanted him.

“Derek, really, no one thinks that. I don’t.”

“Whatever, man. Three more months and I’m outta this fucking town.” He grabbed his bag and stormed off down the hall to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Derek leaned against the door. He knew Steven had a point. Not about the getting laid thing, but Derek knew he’d been snapping everyone’s head off for a month. He couldn’t help it. It was either take it out on his roommates or do something stupid, like punch someone in the face. Preferably Jaden.

He flung his bag across the room, the lamp on the desk crashing to the floor. Derek winced, but thankfully the light bulb didn’t break. He flopped down on his bed and stared up at the spot on the ceiling where he’d tried to attach a disco ball.

Jaden was back. What the fuck was he doing back? He’d left two years ago, stomping Derek’s heart under his heel. Jaden couldn’t wait to get out of town, and had no interest in maintaining any kind of relationship with Derek, despite Derek’s pleading. Looking back, Derek wasn’t proud of how he’d begged, but he’d been young and in love. Jaden claimed he had been too, until he got offered the spot in the graduate program on the other side of the country. Then suddenly it was the old *“It’s not you, it’s me. It’s for your own good. You’re too young.”* Blah, blah, blah. The asshole didn’t even have the guts to just say he didn’t love Derek anymore, and obviously Jaden was interested in fucking around with other guys.

Derek had proved he could fuck around with the best of them after Jaden left.

He’d nearly thrown up the day he’d seen Jaden on campus during exams. He didn’t even think about him anymore... well, not often. Not more than once a week, and then, whammo! He’d been standing in the hallway waiting to talk to his professor. Derek hadn’t been able to avoid him; Jaden had seen him right away and called out to him. Derek had wanted to ignore him and keep walking, and he’d tried, but Jaden had grabbed his arm and short of making a scene in front of his professor, Derek had to speak to him. He’d done the “polite but cool” thing; at least he thought he had.

After Derek finally managed to pull away, he’d had a panic attack in his car. Then came the e-mails. Derek never replied, but like an idiot he read them all. They were always superficial. Jaden was back for a research job in one of the industrial parks connected to the university. He was happy to see people who were still around. He hoped they could get together and catch up. Yeah right. Like that would happen.

Then the invitation to the New Year’s Eve party arrived. Everyone had insisted he go, if for no other reason than to prove he was over Jaden. Steven had agreed to be his date. Jaden had never met Steven, and Steven didn’t know who Jaden was—or the whole sordid story. Then Cory had to go and fuck up that plan. Derek didn’t really blame the guy for coming back to be with Steven, but it had screwed up his own plans.

At the party, Jaden’d had that creepy twink clinging to him like a fucking parasite. Derek got the point. Jaden was over Derek and had moved on. Right. No need to hit him over the head with a two-by-four, or

maybe there was, because Derek had gone straight into the bathroom and thrown up at the party. Derek had then proceeded to get absolutely shit-faced and hooked up with Kellen, one of the few guys on campus whose reputation for doing anyone, anytime, was even more legendary than his own.

Now Derek knew what he had to do. Get away; get out of town, run. He wasn't too proud to admit it, but there was no way he'd ever get his life together if Jaden was around. Derek realized he'd always harboured the hope they'd get back together, but obviously that was a stupid, immature dream. Jaden had the new guy, a new life. Derek had managed to avoid being introduced to "the twink", as he thought of him, at the party. In fact Derek had avoided speaking to Jaden at all. Having Kellen's tongue down his throat most of the night had helped.

Derek had thought about applying for jobs locally, and had even considered grad school, but now he had no choice: he had to leave. It kind of sucked, but life sucked sometimes. Halifax was nice, or maybe Vancouver. Obviously Jaden hadn't wanted to stay there, so no chance Jaden would turn around and move back. Besides, it was a huge city; the odds of them ever running into each other were miniscule.

Now he had a plan. Derek got his lap top and started Googling job openings and grad programs in other cities. He'd buckle down; ace his courses, get a dream job, and move the fuck on. Jaden could rot in hell for all he cared, it was over. Yep. Completely done.

After that Derek actually managed to suck it up around the guys; he stopped snapping at them every time they moved. He wasn't exactly social, but things were better. Derek hadn't been on a date in weeks. Not since the disaster with an adorable freshman who'd seemed hot to try out as much sex as humanly possible during his first year away from home. Of course as they walked into the bar, there sat Jaden and "the twink", surrounded by a posse of their old friends.

Derek had turned on his heel, dragged the guy to another bar, drank too much, blew the guy in the bathroom then caught a cab home. So he couldn't date for a few months. It was no big deal. Once he moved, he could go anywhere he wanted on a date.

Chapter 2

"So, do you have any plans for V-day?"

Derek looked at Steven, who was watching *Jeopardy*, and gave him an odd look. "Umm. No. Why? Do you need me to clear out? I can hang out in my room if you and Cory plan on getting freaky or something. I'll wear ear plugs." He smirked at Steven.

"Ha ha, funny boy." Steven wrinkled up his nose. "I just thought maybe, I don't know. Maybe you were going to ask someone out."

"Nope. No time. I have to ace my courses this term."

"What's with the Mr. Studious thing you have going on?" Steven was genuinely puzzled.

"Gotta get a job dude. Or grad school scholarship, or something. Not gonna get a good job with crappy grades. Job market's tight in Vancouver."

"Derek?" Steven's voice cracked.

"What?"

"You're not seriously leaving town are you? But why? I, I don't want you to leave." Derek looked away from Steven's pitiful face.

"Hey, you're a big boy. You don't need me. You've got Cory, and you'll be graduating in another year anyway. We all gotta grow up and move on. That's the way it works." He stood up when he saw Steven's shocked face, and he broke eye contact. Derek couldn't just sit there and watch Steven get upset. He would miss Steven too. Steven was the best friend he'd ever had, and he could dare him to do anything. Derek smiled to himself. He'd miss that, but shit happened.

As he turned to go back to his room to study some more, someone knocked on the door. Steven was slumped down in the corner of the couch staring at the TV; he obviously wasn't going to move. Derek shook his head, and jerked the door open. Jesus Christ. Jaden was standing at the door, hands in his pockets, gnawing on his lip.

"Hey." He gave Derek a brief smile, which looked more like a grimace. Derek just stared at Jaden, struck dumb. "Um, can I come in?"

Derek blinked twice, then stepped back, immediately kicking himself in the ass for not slamming the door shut. He couldn't very well physically push the guy back out once he'd let him in. Before either of them could say anything, a voice called out from the hallway, moving closer. "Baby, where's my red swim t-shirt?" Cory strolled into the living room wearing nothing but his swim team bathing suit, which was essentially a micro-Speedo, and a pair of socks.

Steven waved one hand over his head, "Kitchen counter."

Cory finally noticed Jaden, and gave him and Derek a sunny smile and little wave. "Hi." They both watched his divine ass encased in black spandex, which bordered on a thong, sway into the kitchen. He was back a second later pulling on the t-shirt, and Derek and Jaden just continued watching. Derek knew Cory and Steven were madly in love, but damn, he knew hot when he saw it. Cory gave them another smile, grabbed some sweats off the back of the couch, then pulled them up over his ass and straddled Steven's lap.

"What's wrong? You look sad?" Steven pulled Cory's head down and whispered something to him. Cory looked up at Derek and frowned. "Shit. I have to go to practice. We'll talk when I get home. Promise." He gave Steven a kiss, "Love you, babe," and continued to frown at Derek. Cory pulled on his shoes and grabbed a winter coat. He gave Derek one more look and left.

Had Cory moved in with them? How had Derek missed that? Cory seemed to always be there, and come to think of it, he gave Derek rent money last week, so Derek supposed he must have. He really needed to start paying more attention to what was going on around him.

Before Derek could even ask Jaden what the hell he wanted, the door flew open and Ivan strode in, in all his goth glory. "Hey, dude. Long time no see." Ivan gave Jaden a punch on shoulder, and went toward the kitchen, yelling over his shoulder, "Do we have any orange juice? That little shit Cory better not have drunk it all." Steven gave him the finger without even looking.

Steven stood up and didn't look at Derek or Jaden, but took off to his bedroom and slammed the door. Derek closed his eyes and took a big breath. He crossed his arms, and finally looked at Jaden. "What do you want, Jaden?"

"Who's that?"

Ivan walked by with the carton of orange in his hand, and went to his room as well. At least he didn't slam the door. Derek wasn't sure if he was glad Ivan had left them alone so he didn't have to do this in front of anyone, or if he'd rather have had back-up. It was too late now.

"Ivan."

"You know that's not who I meant. Who are the other two?"

"None of your fucking business, but Steven and Cory."

"They live here?"

"Is that a problem for you? I don't seem to remember vetting who *you* live with."

Jaden had the grace to blush. "No, no problem. I just ... I just never met them before."

Derek just stared at him. Despite the fact that his heart was going double time, and he suddenly had a vicious pain in his left eye socket, he tried to give off of the "don't give a fuck" attitude. He wasn't going

to offer Jaden anything, they weren't friends, they were exes. Exes didn't see each other again, that was one of the perks.

"Can we talk?" Jaden motioned toward the couch. Derek didn't move, just stared. "Please, Derek?" Jaden's hands were back in his pockets. Derek knew that meant Jaden was nervous, but Derek wasn't sure why.

"Interesting to hear you beg me for something." Derek glared at Jaden.

Jaden winced. "I will beg if you want."

"Dickhead." Derek muttered, and threw himself into the chair. He sure as hell wasn't sitting on the couch with Jaden.

Jaden rubbed his palms on his knees and licked his lips. Shit. Derek was not going to look at Jaden's mouth. Jaden had the best lips. Lips that gave him the kiss-off, he just had to remember that.

"So, how... how've you been?" Jaden was gazing at Derek intently.

Derek shrugged. "Fine."

"You, uh, you seeing anyone?"

Derek gave one of his famous smirks. "Oh, you know how it is, too many boys, not enough time." Derek watched Jaden's eyes widen. "So many freshman, all so eager for new experiences. You remember what that's like, don't you?" Derek wagged his eyebrows, then his smirk fell away, and he stared at Jaden. "Only I don't keep them around long enough to fall in love with me before I move on."

Jaden looked away. "It wasn't like that."

"Uh huh. Bet freshmen love grad students too. UBC is huge; must have been gaggles of them flocking around a stud like you. You knew just the right things to say, to reel me in."

Jaden ran his hand through his hair. "Derek, please. You were young, UBC was so far away, I couldn't..."

"You told me two years ago, dude. You don't need to repeat it. I heard you the first time, and I got the message loud and clear. Eventually. You didn't love me. No biggie. Shit happens. Blah, blah, blah. You've obviously moved on with ..." Derek paused. He didn't know the guy's name, and he wasn't going to call him "the twink" to Jaden's face. Derek just waved his hand in the air. Damn. He felt the familiar throb in his eye that meant a migraine was on its way.

"Oh God. I didn't stop—"

Derek cut him off. "Hey, I'm older and wiser now. I won't make the same mistake again, so just let it go Jaden." He looked down the hallway where Steven had gone. "I'll be," he swallowed, "I'll be gone in three or four months, out of sight out of mind, all of that bullshit." Derek pressed the heel of his hand to his left eye. It felt like it was going to explode.

“Gone?” Jaden sounded lost, and Derek looked up at him with one eye. “Gone where?”

Derek shrugged, while maintaining the pressure on his eye. Maybe his eyeball wouldn’t pop out of his socket and roll across the floor if he kept up the pressure. “Vancouver? Halifax? I don’t know. Somewhere new, a fresh start.” He paused, and met Jaden’s eyes. “No memories, you know?”

“Oh Christ. I’m so sorry. I never meant ...”

Derek just closed his right eye, and kept pressing on his left.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you.” Jaden’s voice was so quiet Derek barely heard him.

“Yeah well, someone’s always going to get hurt right? You should go Jaden. I need to take something, and I’m sure ... I don’t remember his name, is waiting for you.”

“Who?”

Finally Derek opened his eye again. “Don’t fuck with me. I don’t know what you thought coming here. The sex was always hot, I think we both know that, but I’m not going to be your booty call, or some bullshit, while the new guy sits at home wondering if he’s about to get the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech next.” Derek thought he was going to throw up. “Just go.” He bent double pressing on his eye, resting his forehead on his knees. Derek tried breathing deeply to keep the vomit at bay.

Derek heard Jaden get up. If Jaden just left, Derek could get Steven to get him his meds. Shit, Steven probably wasn’t talking to him. Ivan would.

Suddenly Jaden’s hand was on the back of his neck. “Where are your pills?”

Derek pulled away with a hiss. The last thing he needed was Jaden being nice to him, or touching him. “Just go. Steven will help me.”

“I’m not going to leave you like this. Just tell me where the pills are.”

Derek jerked to his feet. The wave of nausea was overwhelming; he dropped to his knees and doubled over, one hand pressing on his eye, the other over his mouth as he tried not to puke on the living room carpet. That would be a bitch to clean up.

“Oh Christ. Okay Derek. I’m going to help you to the bathroom first, and find your meds.”

He wanted to pull away. Derek wanted to tell Jaden to leave him alone and go fuck himself—and “the twink” too—but he was afraid to take his hand away from his mouth to even call for Steven and he knew he couldn’t just lay there. Derek let Jaden help him up. He never opened his eyes, but trusted Jaden to get him to the bathroom. He’d barely made it to the toilet when the retching started. Jaden rubbed his back while he threw up his lunch. Derek was embarrassed, in pain, and emotionally a limp noodle just from having to pretend he didn’t care around Jaden. Derek had thought he didn’t care, until that day in the hallway when he’d seen him again.

Derek coughed and spit out the water Jaden had handed him, still kneeling next to the toilet, his hand pressing on his left eye. "Just go. I'll be fine. Tell Steven. He'll help me."

Jaden patted him on the shoulder. "Don't go anywhere."

He gave a snort. Yeah, like Derek might drag himself to the airport, throwing up every hundred meters, and go on vacation. Where the fuck was he going to go? He couldn't even stand up. The bathroom door closed, he heard a light knock, and then voices. Good, Jaden was getting Steven, who would get him his meds and then help him into bed. Twenty four hours, and he'd be fine. Steven had done this before, he knew what to do. Steven may have been pissed at Derek, but he'd help him when the chips were down.

The bathroom door opened, and Derek sighed in relief. Once he got the pill he'd be better. "Just give me some more water and my pill Stevie, and help me into bed." He held the cup out. "Maybe you can rub my head like you do, huh? If you're not too pissed at me. I'm sorry Steven." Derek felt the tears starting to leak out. The situation sucked.

The pill was placed in Derek's hand; he popped it in his mouth and then downed it with the water. An arm came around his back under his arm and helped him stand up. Derek stood for a minute breathing to see if he was done throwing up, then nodded. As he did, he realized it wasn't Steven helping him. Steven was his height, whoever this was taller and bigger all around, and it wasn't Ivan. Fuck. He cracked his eye open and saw Jaden looking at him. "I thought I told you to go."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't going to leave you having a migraine."

They were moving slowly toward his bedroom, and Derek wanted to push Jaden away, but he needed to lie down. Just for a bit. "I got along fine without you for two years. This isn't the first one I've had, you know."

"Shh. I know." Derek noticed that Jaden closed the bedroom door, and Derek's body was twisted around until he was sitting on the bed. Suddenly hands were fumbling at his waist.

"What the fuck?"

"Hey, you need to take your jeans off. Just helping, okay?"

Derek gave up. He felt like an infant, but he needed the help. He slowly lay back and let Jaden do it. Jaden unzipped his jeans and pulled them off; Derek lifted his hips to help. His socks were peeled off, and Derek rolled around gently in the bed until his head was on the pillow. "Shut the blind." Derek took a deep breath, and offered: "Please?"

"Sure." The room got darker, and Derek felt the meds starting to work. There was a knock at the door, and he heard murmured voices, but he didn't open his eyes. He couldn't. Derek finally released the pressure on his left eye, certain that the eyeball would stay intact now.

“Do you want your shirt off?” Derek startled when he heard Jaden speak, but just shook his head. Jaden laid a cold cloth over his eyes. It felt so good.

“You can go now. I’ll just sleep.” Jaden started gently massaging his head, just like he always had when this happened. It was how Derek had learned what worked to help ease the pain. Usually Derek didn’t wait so long. If he took the pill right away he could avoid the puking and the worst of it. Not today. He just lay still and let Jaden do what he wanted. Derek was too tired to fight it. “I’m sorry.” He whispered it out without even realizing he was going to say it.

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I didn’t know.”

Derek’s brow wrinkled under the cool cloth. Know what? It was the last thing Derek remembered before he drifted off.

Chapter 3

Derek rolled over and opened his eyes when he heard his door open. Steven came in with a glass of orange juice and sat it on the night stand. Derek wondered if you could get orange juice by the keg. Ivan and Cory blew through it like crazy.

Steven sat on the side of the bed and rubbed Derek's shoulder. "Feeling better?"

Derek leaned over and grabbed the orange juice, guzzled it down, then lay back. "Much. What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"At night?" Derek frowned at the window where light was filtering around the blind.

"Sunday morning, goof. You slept like eighteen hours, or something weird."

"Huh. Been a while since I did that and wasn't drunk." He tried to smile at Steven, but it came out kind of watery.

Steven looked down at the bed and picked at the blanket. That was not a good sign. "What?" Derek wondered if Steven was still pissed about the moving thing, but he had to, there weren't any other options.

"I, uh, I talked to Jaden, after you fell asleep." Oh fuck. Great. "He, umm, told me what happened."

Derek slid further away from Steven and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh really. So he told you how he got me to fall in love with him, and then dumped my ass as soon as he got a better offer?"

His eyes wide, Steven's head jerked up to look at him. "It wasn't like that. He said –"

"You weren't there!" Derek snarled at him. "I was there, I felt it. I was the one who got the God-damned 'it's not you, it's me speech'. Don't you *dare* tell me how it was."

Steven drew back blinking. "I, I'm sorry. He just said you were young, and he didn't want to tie you down."

"Do you know how *young* I was?" Steven just looked at him. "I was twenty. I was one fucking year younger than you are now. He's not some old geezer. He was only twenty-two. How would you feel if Cory told you he was going to move to Europe, and wanted to break up with you because you were too *young*?" He watched Steven swallow. "Exactly. It's a bullshit excuse and you'd know exactly what it meant. It meant he wanted to screw other guys and didn't love you, or not enough." Derek looked away, as the threat of tears came ever closer. "I'm not stupid. I know what it means, and it won't happen again."

"I think, I think he did love you, I think he still does." Steven's voice was so quiet Derek barely heard him.

Derek gave a huge snort. "Right," he drawled. "That all makes total sense then. He loved me, so he dumped me, and made me feel like worthless piece of crap. Nice. He should write a book about that technique."

Derek pushed at Steven until he stood up, then crawled out of the bed. "Besides, he's living with 'the twink' now. Happily ever after and all that shit. I'm not going to be his dirty little secret."

"I don't think he's with anyone."

"Ha!" Derek barked out as he pulled his t-shirt off. "Really? I saw the guy. He was practically climbing him like a God-damned cat tree at New Year's." He pushed past Steven. "I need a shower. Just let it go. He made his decision two years ago; you can't turn back time, no matter what Cher says."

"Huh?"

"Whatever. Forget it, Steven. Forget him, focus on Cory and what you have. Don't fuck it up, because that sucks big time." He went to the bathroom, closing the door resolutely behind him.

Derek stood in the shower under the hottest water he could stand. His head started to clear and feel less muzzy. He knew Jaden didn't love him, never really had, he supposed, or perhaps you just simply fell out of love. It happened; he'd seen it happen to his parents, and to his friends who went through boyfriends and girlfriends one after another. There was no happy ever after, no true love, no soul mates. Cory and Steven would find out, and he'd help Steven pick up the pieces, just like Ivan had helped him. He'd feed him ice cream and pour vodka down his throat, until it didn't hurt so much anymore. And then he'd punch Cory in the mouth for hurting his friend. It was a plan. He'd file that under "things to do someday".

The next few days were weird. There were whispered conversations that stopped when Derek entered the room. Cory and Steven, and even Ivan, were looking at him oddly. Phone calls were ended quickly, and excuses made to go out and buy more juice. Jesus Christ. There'd been three gallon jugs and four one litre cartons in the fridge at last count. No one in their household was in danger of getting scurvy, at any rate.

On Friday night, Cory and Steven were curled up on one end of the couch and Derek was at the other, all watching a movie. Steven cleared his throat and Derek watched Cory give him a reassuring pat. He raised an eyebrow. Obviously something was coming.

"What?"

"Umm." Steven hesitated and Cory gave him a nod. "I, uh, I dare you."

"Huh?" Steven did not dare people, that was Derek's schtick. Derek could convince people to do most anything. It wasn't bad stuff, necessarily. He'd dared people to get an A in a course, he'd dared people to go a month without coffee, and okay, he'd dared those football players to eat a jumbo-sized box of Fruit Loops. That had been kind of gross, but as a rule Derek's dares were for someone's own good. It was *his* thing, not Steven's.

Derek snorted, and looked at both of them shaking his head. "I think you have it backward, honey. I'm the one who dares you." He nodded his head at Cory, "Remember?"

"Well, I, we, are daring you back."

"Okay then. Daring me to do what?" He crossed his arms and gave them a smug look. There wasn't much he wouldn't do, or hadn't done, he supposed. The last couple of years had been quite an adventure.

"We dare you to spend Valentine's Day with Jaden, and talk to him, really talk, and not just blow him off."

His eyes wide, Derek stared at them. It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. He could barely catch his breath. Derek stood up, looked them right in the eye and oh-so-calmly stated, "Fuck you both to hell. I thought you were my friends. I was obviously mistaken." It was all clear now: the whispers, the phone calls—they were in league with Jaden about this whole thing. Derek didn't know what Jaden wanted from him. Jaden had already had his virginity, his heart, and his pain. What more did he want? Derek wouldn't be his whore, if that's what this was about.

Cory buried his face in Steven's neck, and didn't look up. Steven's eyes were wide. "Derek, please, he just wants a chance."

Derek's voice could have cut ice. "He had a chance. Two years ago. I would have waited, he obviously couldn't. Over. O-V-E-R. He needs to get that, the same way I did when it happened." He shook his head. "If you know what's good for you, you won't mention this again."

Derek could hear Cory sobbing. Oddly, that made him feel better.

"Please. Give him a chance. He's a nice guy. He'll be here Tuesday night at seven. An hour. Is that too much? As a dare?" Steven was pleading with him, and Derek just didn't care.

"I won't be here." He couldn't help the sneer. "Enjoy your time with your new best friend guys. Oh, and I'll be giving notice on the lease for March thirty first. I told you I was moving, I'm making it official. Have your shit packed and ready to leave. Feel free to go earlier if you like. Don't worry about the rent."

Derek walked down the hallway toward his room. His body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. Derek would never have suspected that Steven would switch allegiances so quickly. But hell, Jaden was an expert at turning the good things in Derek's life to shit, so why not this? Why not take his best friend too?

He could hear Steven calling his name and Cory sobbing "Oh my God, what have we done?", but it all seemed far away and fuzzy. Derek quietly closed the door to his bedroom sat on his bed and just stared the door. His whole body was numb, along with his heart.

Eventually, Derek fell asleep. He heard the door open, and he rolled over, ready to rip Steven or Cory a new one, if they dared to speak to him. It was Ivan, so he relaxed back on the bed. Ivan had known him since before Steven, before Jaden.

Ivan sat on the bed. "Hey dude. Seems some bad shit went down."

Derek just shrugged.

"You know they mean well."

Derek froze.

"Maybe you should think about it."

Okay, that meant Ivan had also decided to desert him, choosing Jaden's side. Derek gave Ivan a giant shove off the bed, and Ivan landed on his ass on the floor.

"What the fuck?"

"If they didn't tell you, I'm putting notice on the lease for the end of March. Have your crap out of here, or talk to the landlord if you want to take it over."

"Where are you going? Where are you gonna live? You have exams until mid-April."

"As if any of you give a shit. Not your concern. Now get out of my room." Ivan just stared at him. "Now!" Derek was yelling now, and if Ivan didn't move soon, it would only get worse.

Ivan shook his head, but backed out of the room. Derek slammed the door so hard that it nearly came off its hinges. This was not happening to him. When had his life gone to such shit?

Chapter 4

For the next three days, Derek simply acted as if he lived alone and the other three were ghosts. He couldn't see them, didn't respond to them when they pleaded with him, and simply walked around them when they tried to stand in front of him to get his attention. It was easier than Derek thought, but then when you were numb inside, it made it easier. When you can't feel anything, life was actually quite simple. It was just a matter of going through the motions.

Saturday afternoon, Derek was tired of seeing Cory sit around looking morose. It was getting harder to ignore him. He decided to take his laptop to a coffee shop and finish his grad school application for Boston. He was taking a chance with an American school, but a border might be good between him and his former friends.

As Derek was putting on his shoes, Steven came out of the kitchen. "Derek? Derek, where are you going? You can't go now. Just wait."

As he'd done for the past few days, Derek just pretended Steven didn't exist and continued doing his laces. Steven grabbed his arm to stop him, and it forced Derek to acknowledge him. Derek simply stared at him blankly, peeled Steven's fingers off his arm, and put on his coat. He opened the door and came face-to-face with Jaden.

Derek tried to go around Jaden and treat him the same as the others. Derek assumed Jaden was there to see Steven and Cory. They were pretty gutsy to invite the guy over to the apartment, but whatever. What they did didn't matter anymore.

Jaden wouldn't move. Derek was finally forced to acknowledge him. "Move."

"No."

Derek physically pulled back at that response. It forced him to meet Jaden's eyes. He'd seen that look before. Jaden had no intention of moving. Derek shrugged, toed off his shoes and put his jacket back on the hook. He turned, walked around Steven, ignored Cory who was standing in living room now, and went to his room shutting the door firmly behind him.

He lay on his bed, folded his hands on his stomach, and stared at the ceiling. He'd wait. The door opened, and for a moment he considered telling them to get the hell out, but that seemed more effort than it was worth, so Derek closed his eyes and lay there, not moving.

The bed dipped as someone sat beside him. "Honey? What's going on with you?"

Shit. He wasn't ready to deal with Jaden. Derek sat up and pushed at Jaden, who frowned, but stood. Derek walked out of the room, into the bathroom, and locked the door. Derek should have put a lock on his bedroom door. He dumped a pile of towels into the tub and climbed in. He thought he may as well be comfortable, he didn't know how long he'd be in there.

The banging started; Derek reached up, pulled the shower curtain closed.

“Derek, open this door right now.” Jaden sounded pissed; Derek couldn’t bring himself to care. There were voices outside the door, and then scraping, and the button on the bathroom door popped open. Derek sighed and waited.

“Derek?” The shower curtain flew back. “What the hell are you doing?” Jaden stood over him, hands on his hips. “Get out. Now. We need to talk.” Derek closed his eyes, and leaned his head against the wall.

Jaden heaved a sigh. “Fine. We’ll do it the hard way.” Jaden leaned over the tub, grabbed Derek by the armpits, and started to drag him out of the tub. Self-preservation kicked in, and Derek scrambled to get his footing as Jaden tugged. Derek smoothed down his shirt and Jaden stepped back. “Derek, what the hell is going on?”

Derek kept his eyes on the floor and tried to go around him.

Jaden stepped in front of him, blocking his escape. “Oh no you don’t.” Jaden put his hands on his shoulders. “The guys said you haven’t spoken to them in days, you haven’t eaten, and they’re totally freaked out. They said you’re kicking them out.”

He turned his head to stare at the sink. So many questions, and it seemed to take far too much energy to answer them all. He’d eaten, he was sure he had. This morning. A frown wrinkled his brow. He was sure it was this morning. Or was that yesterday? His stomach did feel weirdly empty, now he thought of it. And he wasn’t kicking them out. He was moving too. He’d given them nearly two months notice, or they could take over the lease. He’d mentioned that to them, hadn’t he?

“Derek!” Jaden gave him a small shake, and tried to get his attention. Derek just closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “You are freaking *me* the fuck out. Say something.”

Derek shrugged. What was there to say?

Jaden steered him toward his room. “This time you are going to sit there and listen, or else I’ll tie you there.” Derek sat on the bed and stared at the poster on the wall. He hated that poster, some video game bullshit. He should get rid of it. “Derek? Derek! Pay attention for fuck’s sake.”

Derek sighed again. He seemed to be sighing an inordinate amount the last couple of days. He thought he should work on that. Okay, fine, he would listen, Jaden would leave, he could continue with his plans. He finally turned his head and looked at Jaden. He said nothing, but raised an eyebrow, indicating he was ready.

“Okay. Um, I was talking to Steven...”

Derek lips tightened. This was not news. Steven had chosen Jaden.

“And it seems you have some screwed up ideas of what’s going on.” Derek started to turn his head to look at the poster again, but Jaden grabbed his jaw and forced him to look at his face. “No, you pay attention to me. Peter is not my lover.”

Derek frowned. He had no clue who Peter was, but if that's what Jaden claimed, fine.

"Peter is the guy at my place on New Year's."

Ah, "the twink". Derek got it. Jaden had dumped "the twink" too. Maybe Derek and Twink could get together and swap stories about broken hearts. Derek decided then and there that "the twink" had become Twink. Peter was, well, a boring name.

"We never even dated. I met him when he was in his last year of high school."

That got a flicker from Derek. His lips curled up slightly.

"Get your mind out of the gutter. He was an intern at the university; he was feeling lost and alone. He's gay and his parents are Jehovah's Witnesses, so I took him under my wing." Jaden smacked Derek's shoulder. "Stop it; I know what you're thinking."

Jaden pushed his hands through his hair. "He told his parents he was gay, and they shunned him. The whole community did. He had no one, and nowhere to go, so he moved in with me and I managed to get him into university here starting this term."

Derek wasn't sure what he was supposed to say or do. Fine. Twink was going to school, Jaden was a hero. Maybe "It Gets Better" would give him an award.

"He could use some friends, Derek."

Derek tried to speak but his throat was so dry. He wondered when the last time he'd talked to someone. Yesterday at Starbucks maybe. You couldn't really order at Starbucks without speaking. He coughed, and Jaden handed him an open bottle of water he had on the night table. Derek drank it down and cleared his throat. "I'm sure Cory and Steven will be happy to be Twink's friend. They like making new friends. Just be prepared for them to dump your ass once they choose him."

Jaden's brow furrowed. "Who the hell is Twink?"

Derek weakly waved a hand. "The guy. Your ex. The JW."

"His name is Peter, not Twink, and he's not my ex. He's only eighteen for Christ's sake."

Derek shrugged. He'd dated guys who were eighteen, some were even seventeen. They had great recovery time.

"Look," Jaden sounded frustrated. "I'm not dating anyone; I haven't for a long time."

"Are we done now?" Derek lifted his gaze to look at Jaden. That might have been a mistake. Jaden's gray eyes were beautiful. You could tell what Jaden was feeling by his eyes. When he was happy they got lighter and sparkly. When he was mad they got dark, like storm clouds. Now they looked kind of cloudy and dull. That meant he was nervous or worried.

"No, we are not done."

Derek couldn't resist rolling his eyes. He flopped back on the bed, pulled his legs around, rolled on his side so he was facing the wall, and curled up in the foetal position. It was Jaden's turn to sigh. Jaden lay down behind Derek, and flung his arm around him, pulling Derek back against his chest. Derek started to struggle but Jaden was bigger than him, and he simply pulled him in tighter.

"Lay still and listen, or I told you I'll tie you here."

A smirk crossed Derek's face and he was glad Jaden couldn't see it. He huffed, but lay still. "I think you've got the part about who ties up who backward." He remembered those times when he'd tied Jaden to the bed and had his wicked way with him.

Jaden let out a snort of laughter, then took a deep breath. "Now you listen, and don't zone out on me. Pay attention."

"Yes, boss. Sheesh." Jaden was quiet for a few minutes, and just when Derek was about to start squirming, because it was starting to feel too damn good, Jaden took a big breath.

"I was scared."

Derek frowned, but lay still.

"I was afraid you'd get tired of waiting for me. That you'd be here with all of your friends, young guys who could take you out, go dancing with you, be there to talk to you every day, be there to touch you, and that you'd eventually get tired of having a guy living thousands of miles away who couldn't do those things with you. It would have killed me if you'd cheated on me."

Derek tried to jerk away, but Jaden pulled him in tight. "Just listen."

"When I got past the fear, I felt I was ruining your university experience. My undergrad years were the best of my life. The last two years with you were amazing, we partied, we hung out, we watched movies, we ate out. What was I asking you to do? Sit home by yourself while your friends dated and partied, because you had a boyfriend you saw every three or four months, if that?"

Derek didn't move, he was barely breathing.

"And from what I heard from our friends, I think maybe I did the right thing. You took advantage of these last couple of years to date a lot of people and try out lots of new things."

That was it; Derek had reached the end of his patience. The cold dead feeling inside melted in a blaze of white hot fury, Derek fought and struggled to turn around, until he was finally facing Jaden. Derek pulled back his arm to punch him, but Jaden grabbed him before he could let it fly.

"You are so fucking stupid. One, I don't appreciate our friends spying on me, and reporting back to my ex. Two, fucking seventy-five percent of the gay population on campus, and a goodly portion of the straight one, does not equal dating. I didn't give a fuck about any of those guys, but they wanted me. They thought I was sexy and desirable, and worth putting out an effort for, at least for a night, even if

you didn't. The person who supposedly loved me didn't think I was worth the effort. I proved that I was. That I should have been."

"Oh God. I'm so sorry. I thought you'd find another guy, fall in love, and forget about me." Jaden buried his face in Derek's hair as Derek tried to pull away.

"That will never happen. I'll never fall in love again. It doesn't last, happy ever after is bullshit. And it hurts too much." He lay still in Jaden's arms, Jaden's hand still wrapped around his wrist.

"You are so worth it." Jaden touched his forehead to Derek's. Derek didn't pull away. "You deserved so much more. You deserve it now. Happy ever after can happen. It could happen, for us."

"Until when? The next time you decide to take off and can't be bothered to put in any effort to keep a relationship going?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't want you to go anywhere either. Stay here, let's see what happens. I want to spend time with you, talk, watch movies, all the things we used to do."

"Why?"

Jaden's face moved closer and he paused for a moment, then ever so softly kissed Derek. Derek's brain shorted out, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he just needed more. As Jaden pulled back, Derek tried to follow his mouth, searching for another kiss. He stopped when he realized Jaden was smiling at him. Derek pulled away with a huff. He wasn't going to beg. He jerked away from Jaden and frowned.

Jaden let go of his wrist, and stroked his hair. "Because I still love you. And," he swallowed, "maybe you could love me again, if we give it some time."

Oh, Derek knew he could, knew he still did, but did he want to try this again? He closed his eyes, the lump in his throat huge. "It hurt so bad." Derek wrapped his arms around Jaden and just held on, his hands fisting Jaden's shirt.

"I know, and I'm so so sorry. I was stupid and ... there's no reason. I was just fucking stupid." Jaden clung to Derek. "I'll make it up to you. I promise. I'm not sure how, but I'll try forever to never make you feel that way again."

After a few minutes of just holding each other, Jaden gave him another small kiss. He pulled back again before Derek could even respond. "So you're not going to tell the landlord to cancel the lease, and you're going to let the guys still live with you?"

Derek scowled.

"Derek." Jaden gave him a look. "They did it because they love you, and *are* your friends, not because they chose me. I did ask them for help, but if they'd thought I didn't love you, or was screwing with you, you know Ivan would have made sure I disappeared and no one ever found the body."

True. Derek had to admit that. Ivan knew people. It was frightening sometimes. “They feel awful.” Jaden continued. “Cory’s been a wreck.”

Derek stuck out his lower lip. “Well, the little shit should have minded his own business.” That got him a little shake. He wasn’t going to get his hopes up about anything positive happening between him and Jaden. He wasn’t naïve and stupid enough to believe that love was all you need, or whatever the hell the Beatles said. But he supposed he couldn’t really feel any worse than he did already. “Fine, they can stay.” Steven *was* his best friend.

“Umm, Steven said they dared you.”

“They had no right. That’s *my* job, I dare people. Assholes.”

“But it’s out there now. It can’t be taken back. That’s the rules. Are you going to accept it?”

Derek pursed his lips. “One hour with you on V-Day? I can probably handle that.”

“Oh no, I’m upping the dare.”

Derek’s mouth dropped open in outrage. “You can’t do that. You can’t have some kind of weird, combined-shit dare.”

Jaden looked smug. “Yes we can. Or fine, their dare is one hour; my dare is you spend the whole night with me, following the hour they dared you to.”

“That’s just fucking stupid, and makes no sense. You’re layering dares.” Derek shook his head. “You guys suck at this.” Derek knew he could win if he put his mind to it. He may not have been sure about where things were going with Jaden, but one night wouldn’t be so bad, would it? It’s not like Jaden wasn’t still hot and Derek hadn’t been with anyone in weeks. “So what, we hang out with Twink at your place? That’s romantic.”

Derek jumped as Jaden’s hand landed a swat on his ass. “Peter.”

“Twink.” Derek hid his grin. It wouldn’t be good to let Jaden in on how good being with him again felt, even with all of his insecurities rearing their heads.

Jaden literally growled. “Peter. And don’t worry about it; it won’t be three’s-a-crowd.” Jaden suddenly sprang from the bed. “Come on. You know they’re probably out there freaking out and wondering if you’ve killed me yet.”

“I should have.” He put on a pout, but let Jaden tug him up. Jaden pulled him into his arms, kissed him—this time he didn’t pull back—and Derek tipped his head to get closer. He forced Jaden’s mouth open, and plunged his tongue in. Oh God, how could he have forgotten how amazing this was? Jaden’s hands wandered down to his ass and latched on. Derek smiled into the kiss. They could talk to the guys later.

Eventually, Jaden pushed Derek away. “*You* are naughty.”

Derek just grinned. "Fine, let's get it over with."

Jaden grabbed his hand. "Hey, they're your friends, remember?"

They walked into the living room, and Cory was curled up on Steven's lap. Well, shit, Derek sighed to himself. The guy looked like hell, his eyes all puffy, nose red—and Steven didn't look much better. They looked like a pair of pitiful kicked puppies, curled up in the chair together. Ivan just stood silently by the TV. Derek walked over to Cory and Steven, and stopped in front of the chair. They looked up at Derek, and Cory sniffled. Fuck.

Derek held his arms out to them, and they both leapt up flinging their arms around him, burrowing their faces into his neck. They squeezed so tightly Derek couldn't breathe. Derek wrapped his arms around the two, and held on. Cory was mumbling "sorry" over and over, and Steven just stood silently. After a minute, Derek tightened his hold, and released them.

"Okay, no more dicking around in my love life. Got it?" They both nodded. "Okay then. Umm..." he wasn't sure what he should do next. "Uh, love you." They looked at Derek and smiled. Alright, he'd done good. He watched them collapse back in the chair, kind of petting each other.

Then it appeared to be Ivan's turn. He pushed off the wall and walked over. He looked closely at Derek's face, and to Derek's shock pulled him into a hug. He was engulfed in the much larger embrace of the man, his face squished against his shoulder. Ivan bent down, and whispered in his ear, "It's his last chance. If he fucks you over," he paused, "it won't be pretty." Derek just nodded, and squeezed back. Ivan had been there the first time, he'd seen the ugly, and Derek knew Ivan had his back.

"So." They all kind of stood there looking awkward. Now what?

Ivan made the first move. "Gotta go man. Hot date."

Derek's eyebrows rose. "With who?" Ivan had been at loose ends since Marissa, his girlfriend of ten months had decided she wasn't so goth after all, and had shed the black clothes, eye liner and Ivan, all in one fell swoop.

"Julie. New girl at work. Smokin'." They all laughed as Ivan sauntered down the hall to his room.

Jaden said he had to go to a work event that night, and he pulled Derek over to the door with him. Derek resisted the urge to beg Jaden to stay. He didn't want to come across as needy, and he thought he probably needed some time to get his head on straight and figure out what the hell was going on.

Jaden gave him a small smile. "So be ready Tuesday night. Seven o'clock."

Derek nodded. "Any special instructions?"

"Pack a bag." Jaden smirked. "Unless you don't think you can handle the dare."

"Ha ha. I never back down."

Jaden's face sobered. "I know." Jaden gave him a quick kiss and squeezed his hand again. "See you Tuesday."

Derek thought he might have had a slightly goofy look on his face when he went back to the living room. He plunked himself down on the couch and looked over at Cory and Steven, who were still in the chair looking back at him. Why had he never noticed they looked like matching puppies, or maybe kittens? He gave a little wave of his hand, and they piled over onto the couch beside him. He grabbed the blanket and the remote, and they settled down for an evening of DVR'd Jeopardy and Conan.

Chapter 5

Tuesday, Derek started pacing in his room around three. He showered, twice, and by six was practically crawling out of his skin. He tried to talk himself down. He'd been on dozens of dates, it was no big deal. In fact it should have been less of a deal, since he knew Jaden. He admitted he was lying to himself; the fact that it *was* Jaden was what made it the big deal. What if they'd lost the spark? What if Jaden was a total asshole now, who'd gone vegetarian or something weird, out on the West Coast. What if he'd found religion? He said Twink was a Jehovah's Witness, what if Jaden had converted? He gave himself a mental shake. He was pretty sure you couldn't be a JW and gay. Well, not openly—Twink was here after all, not back in Vancouver.

At six-thirty he left his room and stuck his bag by the door. Cory and Steven were in the kitchen making some kind of fancy pizza. They'd talked about making it heart shaped, but Derek hadn't been listening that closely while he'd been freaking out between showers. He sat and turned on the TV, then proceeded to flick through all five-hundred plus channels in rapid succession. He turned it off, sat for a second, then went straight to the kitchen. He needed distraction.

"Whatcha doin' guys?"

They looked up from their work on the counter and Cory had flour on his face, but both them were grinning with flushed cheeks.

"It worked!" Steven declared with a flourish.

When Derek frowned they both waved at the counter. Sure enough, there was a heart shaped, more or less, pizza on the on a tray, with a big S + C spelled out in mushrooms, and with pepperoni cut out like hearts sprinkled all around. Derek's eyes widened. It looked pretty cute, he'd give them that.

"Wow guys. You should go into business." They grinned back. When the knock on the door arrived, Derek's heart did a flip-flop.

Steven winked at him. "Okay, don't forget our dare."

Derek rolled his eyes.

Steven continued. "Have fun. Don't be too loud. Use condoms. Don't come home too early. Umm, and have fun."

"You said that already."

"Yeah, well, have double fun."

Derek left them giggling over whether or not to cut green pepper in the shape of a penis, took a deep breath and answered the door. Jaden was there with a huge grin on his face and Derek presumed he looked just as happy.

Jaden spoke first. "So, you ready?"

"Uh huh." Derek figured his brain must have gone on hiatus.

He grabbed his coat and bag, and followed Jaden out the door. When they got in the car Jaden turned to face Derek. Derek thought he was going to get a kiss, but instead Jaden held something up, dangling it from his fingers.

"What the hell?" Derek pulled back from whatever it was. When he finally focused on it, he realized it was a blindfold, the kind you got on an airplane for an overnight flight. "What's that for?"

"I want to surprise you."

"We're not going to your place?"

"If I told you where we were going, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" Jaden's voice had just a hint of sarcasm.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine." Derek snatched the blindfold from Jaden's hand. "One condition."

"What?"

"You have to kiss me first."

"I think I can handle that." Jaden put his hands on both sides of Derek's face and pulled him closer. Their lips met, soft and gentle, Jaden barely touching his lips to Derek's, then pulling back. "Come on. It's surprise time."

Derek decided to pout a bit. "That was a pretty lame kiss." Jaden just smiled at him and raised an eyebrow. "Fine." Derek put the mask on, let Jaden adjust it and then did up his seat belt. "Are you abducting me?"

"I don't think it's abducting if the person agrees to go with you."

"Maybe." Derek tried to keep track of which way they went, to see if he could figure out their destination, but he soon lost track and he started to wonder if Jaden was driving in circles just to confuse him. Eventually they stopped and Derek heard the window roll down, then back up, and there was a sense of quiet surrounding the car as they drove forward. Derek was pretty sure they had entered an underground parking garage of some kind.

Jaden stopped the car and shut it off. "Can I take off the mask now?"

"Nope."

"What? You're going to take me out in front of people blindfolded?"

"Yep. Do I need to dare you?"

“No, dickhead.” Derek heaved a sigh. “Fine, but if I walk into a wall or something, I’m holding you responsible.”

Jaden ran his fingers down Derek’s cheek. “Don’t worry honey. I’ll take care of you.” His voice was so quiet and serious Derek got a lump in his throat.

When the passenger door opened, Jaden took Derek’s arm and helped him out, then grabbed his bag from the back seat. He put his arm around Derek’s waist and started leading him. He kept murmuring little encouraging comments, then slowed to a stop. “Step here.” Derek tentatively stepped up and Jaden told him four steps, and then stopped him while he opened a door. Derek could hear people, but no one said anything directly to them. They didn’t go far until Jaden brought him to a stop and they waited. “Not much longer.” Jaden had bent down and whispered in his hear. Derek hadn’t realized how tense he was. He relaxed into Jaden’s hold. If Jaden was comfortable with people seeing them like this, then he should be as well.

The elevator door dinged open, they entered, and Jaden pulled him back against his chest with his arms wrapped around him from behind. They waited in silence as the elevator ascended. When the door opened, Jaden led him to the left, and the left again, eventually stopping and Derek heard the sound of a key card swiping through the lock. The door opened and Jaden ushered him in with his hand on the small of his back. He took him forward ten steps, and got him to stop.

“Now?”

Jaden chuckled. “Not yet. Just give me one minute.”

Jaden was moving around the room, then Derek heard the sound of a lighter and smiled when the smell of cinnamon invaded the room. Jaden remembered. Derek had always had a thing for cinnamon candles. He frowned momentarily. He hadn’t owned or smelled a cinnamon candle since Jaden left nearly two years ago. He felt a band constrict around his heart. Suddenly he wasn’t sure he could do this. Each good memory was leading to a bad one, mostly to the one of Jaden leaving and crushing his dreams.

Arms came around him pulling him against Jaden’s chest. “What’s wrong honey?”

Derek held himself still in Jaden’s embrace. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I can do this.”

Jaden gently peeled the blindfold off Derek with one hand, keeping his other arm wrapped around him. Derek blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. He glanced around the room and saw that Jaden had lit several candles, there was food and a bottle of wine in a chiller by the small table, the covers were turned down, and everything looked romantic and perfect for a Valentine’s Day celebration.

All of that only freaked Derek out even more. It made him remember their last Valentine’s, when Jaden had done something similar, but at his apartment as they’d both been poor students then. Derek could feel himself starting to panic. If everything was exactly the same, it would end exactly the same. He struggled against Jaden’s hold. Jaden released him, the look on his face a cross between concern and confusion.

“Derek. What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“This is too... I don’t know. It’s too much. It’s too the same. I can’t deal with this. It’s just going to end the same.” He backed away from Jaden.

Jaden held his hands out as if trying to calm him. “Maybe we need to talk okay? Why don’t we sit down, and you can tell me what’s going on.” He waved his hand toward the table and chairs.

He was tempted run out of the room, but that little dare niggled at the back of Derek’s mind and his stupid competitive nature made him stay. He sat in one of the chairs, and when Jaden picked up the bottle of wine with a questioning look, Derek nodded. Maybe some alcohol would help. Jaden filled his glass about half full and he gulped it down.

“Hey, easy.” Jaden poured a bit more into his glass and sat. “So what’s going on Derek?”

Derek shook his head. “I’m not sure. Suddenly, everything just seemed the same, like it was. Before you left.”

“But it was good, right?”

“Yeah, it was.” He looked Jaden squarely in the eye. “And it ended badly.”

Jaden looked thoughtful for a few minutes, his eyebrows drawn down. Derek finished the wine in his glass and picked at the nuts, olives and cheese on the table. He was already getting a buzz from the alcohol, given that he’d eaten nothing all day. Jaden finally spoke.

“But it’s not really the same is it?” Derek just tipped his head in confusion. “We’re different now. Neither of us is the same person we were when I fucked it up.” He looked down at his hands, then back at Derek. “But I’d like to get to know you, now. I’m sorry if it seems like I’m trying too hard to recreate what we had. I guess I just wanted to make you happy and have things I knew you liked. I remember the good.”

His shoulders rising, Derek shrugged. He met Jaden’s eyes then looked quickly away. “I remember the bad.” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Oh honey. I’m so sorry.” Jaden grabbed Derek’s wrist and tugged him out of his chair and down onto his lap. Derek had always liked the fact that Jaden was so much bigger than him and he could curl up on his lap. He decided to just enjoy it and cuddled in, putting his head on Jaden’s shoulder, while Jaden’s hands ran up and down his back.

“How about we start over, huh? I’ll try not to recreate the past, and we can just get to know each other?”

Derek thought for a few moments then nodded his head. Maybe he could do that. He still found Jaden attractive. Just sitting there on his lap and inhaling Jaden’s scent had him half-hard, even with all the bullshit. He nuzzled Jaden’s neck, and his tongue flicked out to lick at him. Jaden just tipped his head

back with a little moan. Derek started nibbling and sucking on Jaden's neck, being careful not to leave a mark. He worked his way up to Jaden's ear lobe and gave it a tug with his teeth.

"Derek?" Jaden's voice sounded a bit strained, and when Derek wiggled a bit on his lap he felt Jaden's hard cock pressing against his hip. Derek pulled his head back, then placed one hand on Jaden's face and angled it down for a kiss. Jaden was hesitant at first, as if he was afraid Derek was going to freak out again, but Derek didn't give up, he pressed his mouth more firmly against Jaden's and Jaden opened for him, allowing Derek's tongue inside, Jaden's arms tightening around Derek's back.

They finally broke the kiss, both breathless. Derek gave a twisted smile. "Well, I'm glad some things are still the same."

Jaden's eyes looked a bit unfocussed. "Uh huh." Derek chuckled and started to stand. Jaden tightened his hold.

"Easy, easy. Let's move it somewhere more comfortable than these God-awful chairs." Jaden nodded and followed Derek up.

As soon as Jaden stood, Derek moved in closer and began unfastening the buttons on Jaden's shirt. Jaden stood quietly and let him work. Derek pushed the shirt off Jaden's shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Derek then pulled his own t-shirt over his head. He enjoyed watching Jaden's eyes take in the sight. Jaden's hands finally reached out to smooth over his chest. He hesitated at Derek's nipples and gently rubbed his fingertips over them. Derek hissed and arched his back.

"Come on." Derek took Jaden's hand and led him over to the bed. He then undid the button and zipper on his pants and pushed them down Jaden's hips along with his underwear. He couldn't help but stare. Jaden was still as gorgeous as ever. His cock was hard and standing out from his body. Derek wrapped his hand around Jaden and pumped him slowly twice.

Jaden pulled back and Derek looked up at his face in confusion. He indicated Derek's pants with a wave. "You too." Jaden then toed off his shoes and finished kicking off his pants and socks while Derek quickly stripped off as well.

As if by unspoken agreement they both climbed onto the bed, hands and mouths touching and tasting as they went. They flopped over on their sides, legs tangled together and Derek rubbing his stiff prick against Jaden's stomach.

Jaden pulled his mouth away from Derek's for a moment, panting. "What do you want honey? Whatever you want." Before Derek could answer, Jaden was back suckling on one of Derek's nipples, his fingers plucking at the other, while his hips thrust against him.

"You, I want you."

"Okay." Jaden pushed Derek away, slid over to the middle of the bed, and rolled on his stomach. Jaden had always preferred to be on his knees, even though Derek liked to see his face. He claimed it felt

better that way. Jaden adjusted himself and then wiggled his butt. "Now Derek." He waved one hand toward the night table, where he'd set a bottle of lube and some condoms.

Derek hesitated for a moment. When he and Jaden had been together, they'd stopped using condoms fairly soon. Derek had been a virgin and so once Jaden got tested they went bare. The condoms on the table reminded him of the time apart, all the guys he'd fucked and who'd fucked him in the last two years. He gritted his teeth and shook his head. Condoms were a must, for both of them. He needed to convince himself that they were starting over. No old memories.

"Derek." Jaden whined it out, looking over his shoulder, and adjusting the pillows under his chest.

He scooped up a condom and the lube, tossed it on the bed, and then Derek moved behind Jaden. He admired the view for a few minutes, his hands moving over Jaden's fine ass. Jaden had the kind of skin that turned golden brown in summer but was pale in the winter. There were no tan lines, but Derek knew there would be.

Jaden was tall, much taller than Derek. His wide shoulders tapered down to a slim waist. Derek traced the muscles in his back and eventually reached his hips. He had dimples at the top of his ass, and Derek bent over to kiss each one. Jaden thrust his butt up towards Derek as soon as Derek's tongue touched him.

"Come on." Derek couldn't help but chuckle. Jaden had always been the impatient one.

He tore open the condom, rolled it on, and tossed the wrapper over the side of the bed. He flipped open the lube, and when Jaden heard the click of the lid, his hips rose even higher, wiggling in front of Derek. Derek shook his head. The man was definitely impatient.

The bottle held high, Derek drizzled some of the lube down Jaden's crack. He laughed when Jaden gave a little squeak at the cold lube. Jaden glared over his shoulder. "You're mean."

Once Derek started rubbing the slippery liquid around Jaden's hole, his look went from annoyed, to glazed over blissful. "Oh yeah." It came out as more of a sigh than words, and Jaden buried his head in the pillow, moving his hips to encourage Derek to penetrate him with a finger or ... anything.

Derek added more lube and slowly pushed two fingers into Jaden. Jaden had always liked it hard and fast, but he was tight, and Derek wanted this to be memorable for other reasons than it hurt like hell. Jaden wiggled and pushed back. "Now Derek. Enough."

Another drizzle of lube over his sheathed cock, and Derek was ready. He grasped Jaden's hip with one hand, and the other gripping his cock he aimed and slowly pressed against Jaden, as Jaden pushed back.

Derek had fucked a lot of guys, but Jaden felt like coming home. He kept pressing forward until he was tight up against Jaden's ass cheeks, as far in as he could get. Derek never wanted to leave.

However, a few seconds later, Jaden nudged him. "Come on. Do it."

Derek shook his head, but smiled and slowly pulled back. Jaden's body tried to follow him, and then his back arched when Derek thrust forward. Jaden let out a grunt each time he did it, over and over.

Soon, Derek lost the ability to really think about what he was doing. His body took over and was moving seemingly without his input. Jaden was thrusting back, they were both making random sounds, the sweat pooling in the hollow of Jaden's spine. Jaden lifted his ass a bit higher to get his hand underneath himself, and Derek knew it was almost time. He reached his own hand around and tangled his fingers with Jaden's, both of them stroking him off together. Derek's hips were moving faster, short shallow strokes. He hoped he was hitting Jaden's hot spot, but his brain really couldn't seem to focus on whether he was or not. It just felt too damn good.

Jaden's sharp cry when he came triggered Derek, who just grabbed Jaden's hip more tightly, pressed in as far as he could go, and held still as his body shuddered behind Jaden. Jaden's body went limp and Derek flopped down on Jaden's back, both of them heaving great breaths, trying to get more oxygen into their lungs.

Derek gently withdrew and pulled off the condom. He stared at it in his hand for a moment, once again a reminder of what had passed since they'd last been together. He shook off his thoughts. Derek glanced fondly at Jaden who had yet to move. Jaden had always been the type to turn into a lump after sex. Derek had enjoyed taking care of him when he'd crashed, and despite all that had passed, it kind of gave him a charge to do it again. He got them both cleaned up and pushed Jaden around until he was able to lie beside him.

Jaden's arm snaked around Derek, pulling him closer. He went with it and cuddled up tight to Jaden's side, his head on his shoulder. Jaden hummed contentedly. "Damn that was great."

"Mmhmm."

"Now I'm starving."

"The food's right there."

"Yeah. In a minute. When I can move." He pulled Derek even tighter against him, both arms wrapped around him keeping him close. "I love you."

Derek's breath caught. He did love Jaden, he'd never stopped, but he wasn't sure he was ready to hand Jaden his heart on a platter. He wasn't a hundred percent sure he trusted Jaden. Not yet.

Jaden kissed the top of his head. "It's okay. I just wanted you to know."

He nodded his head. Derek was willing to give it time. He thought maybe it could work, maybe he could trust Jaden again, eventually. He wanted to. For just a brief moment, he allowed himself to believe that happy ever after could be his. That fleeting thought was enough to ease the tight band around his chest.

He didn't need a dare to tell him Jaden was where his heart was meant to be.